

The sources, evils and correctives of pride of intellect : an address, delivered before the Philaethean Society of Hanover College, IA., July 26th, 1842 / by John P. Harrison.

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Harrison (J. P.)

THE

SOURCES, EVILS AND CORRECTIVES

OF

PRIDE OF INTELLECT; AN ADDRESS,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

PHILALETHEAN SOCIETY, OF HANOVER COLLEGE, IA.

July 26th, 1842.



BY JOHN P. HARRISON, M. D.,

Professor of Materia Medica in the Medical College of Ohio.

CINCINNATI: \

PRINTED BY J. B. & R. P. DONOGH.

1842.

Philal. Hall, July 27th, 1842,

DR. HARRISON,—*Sir*:—In behalf of the Philal. Society of Hanover College, we solicit for publication a copy of your very able and eloquent address. Believing its publication will add much to the interest of our society and to the College with which we are connected ; we hope you will comply with our request.

With sentiments of the highest regard, Yours, etc.

JNO. C. GREEN,
JNO. L. TRENCHARD, } *Committee.*
JAS. N. SAUNDERS,

~~~~~  
*Hanover, July 27th, 1842.*

GENTLEMEN:—In reply to your polite request, I herewith put into your hands for publication, my Address delivered before your Society. Accept my assurance of great consideration and respect, whilst

I remain your Ob't Serv't.

JOHN P. HARRISON.



# THE SOURCES, EVILS AND CORRECTIVES

## OF

### PRIDE OF INTELLECT.

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MAN is pre-eminently raised by the force of his high endowments of mind, amid the vast creation of God, as the sovereign proprietor of this earth. To him, of all the inhabitants of the globe is committed the office of subduing the stubborn soil, and of converting the elements of nature, by which he is surrounded, into the instruments of his will, to advance the multiplied objects of his industry, contrivance and curiosity. By the power and far-reaching grasp of his genius he is enabled to build cities, establish polities, diffuse on every hand the comforts and elegancies of a refined civilization, and create those moral relations which bind his heart to the great and noble ends of his social existence.

Gifted with an intellectual eye which penetrates the skies, he is capacitated to hold correspondence with the Supreme Author of his being, and to derive from such exalted communion daily encouragement to his progress in virtue, and augmented light to his advancement in wisdom. His erect attitude and open countenance, on which the emotions of his soul are engraven in signatures of dignity, and beauty, bespeak him as endowed with no inferior nature, and as destined to no inglorious aim. Possessed of a body of wonderful mechanism, most complex in structure, and the most intricate in function, mysteriously united to a mind of ceaseless activity, man is apt to turn an eye of complacent regard on his nature, and draw materials of self-glorification from his capacities and powers.

The dignity and excellence of human nature have been the theme of many a poetic effusion, and the ground-work on which many a fascinating theory has been built. O ! it is very soothing to the pride of man to expatiate in lofty panegyric on his superiority and greatness, and from a fancied elevation to look around, and feel that in the august temple of nature, he is the supreme and central object of admiration and praise.

But is it becoming man thus to exult in ideal excellence ! Is there not abundant ground for the exercise of a self-renouncing spirit, and should not a consciousness of his weakness and mortality rebuke all arrogant pretensions from his bosom, and bring him in profound humility to confess that he is

“ A poor, finite object, in the abyss  
Of infinite Being, twinkling restlessly.”

The design of the following address is to point out the sources and evils, and to suggest some correctives, of that pride of intellect, which is so universal among mankind.

From a too conclusive contemplation of the range and penetration of human reason a sort of generic pride of intellect has sprung, which under various forms has existed in the world, but has been developed in its most revolting features in modern times. An apotheosis of reason has been the favorite aim of the transcendental philosophy of Cousin, Hegel, Emerson and other visionary speculatists on the perfectibility of man.

With daring hand they have erected an altar to the divinity of reason and on it offered the incense of their poetical and philosophic contributions. In their attempt to deify reason they derogate from the excellence of the understanding. Agreeably to their assertions, reason is the sublime of human spontaneity ; it is fixed, in all its decisions appeals to itself as the ground and substance of their truth. It is the direct aspect of truth ; possesses immediate knowledge, and constitutes the whole life of the mind in all its activity. Reason, according to this doctrine, takes cognizance of that which is self evident, necessary, absolute, infinite, eternal ; it is the necessary mediator between God and man ;—not indeed the absolute God in his majestic individuality,



but his manifestation in spirit and in truth ; it is not the Being of beings, but it is the revealed God of the human race. All truth, says Cousin, exists in the human race. Humanity is inspired. Reason is immediate intuition, as opposed to induction and demonstration. Man, says Troxler, another modern writer of this school of philosophers, can know all things only in and through himself.

The understanding is inferior to reason. It is discursive, and obliged to collect proof, and deduce judgments, and in all such judgments, refers to some other faculty as its ultimate authority. Understanding is the faculty of reflection, and is the seat of all error and immorality. Its office is not to see truth, but to arrange it ; it is not capable of making any new discoveries of knowledge but merely shows us the relations of knowledge. It however, can analyze, draw comparisons, and systematize its knowledge. It acts freely in these processes, and not involuntarily like the reason. It may hence perplex the pure intuitions of reason, it may put evil for good, and good for evil, mislead the soul and sophisticate and darken its faculties. Human reason, by internal revelation, which springs from the divine spark that exists in all minds, not being quenched but fanned into a flame, is transfigured into the Divine reason ; or, says De Wette, if you chose, it is brought back into its original purity and perfection ; its archetype, grown confused and deformed, comes up again distinct and clear.

With such wild and erring fancies these transcendental philosophers grow big with high notions of their own divinity. Thus Fichte asserts boldly that the *me* is God. Hegel makes no distinction between himself and God ; he gives himself out, says Menzel, for God. For he says expressly, God cannot know himself, but in men must first come to a self-consciousness. This impious language of these modern Titans needs no comment to expose its vile depravity. Such pride of intellect enthrones man on the glories of the universe, and spreads universal darkness over the fair creation, and plucking the eternal Father from his throne, thrusts in his place a poor, drivelling, vamping philosopher,



who gropes for truth in the misty vacuity of his own blinded and infatuated reason.

But there are men, who, rejecting, with strong feelings of abhorrence, the opinions of Fichte and Hegel, still urge that reason is competent, without any special aid from on high, to conduct us to just views of truth, and to empower man with motives sufficient to sustain his soul in all the conflicts of his moral being. In the school of fine sentiment, and of romance much is said, most beautifully, about the charms of virtue, and the delights of knowledge, and were we to confide in their day-dreams respecting the perfectibility of man, and of the fine perceptions of his intellect in the discovery of truth, we should rejoice, with ineffable rapture, that ere long earth would reflect back the image of heaven, and all error and guilt be for ever exiled from the habitations and the heart of man.

But, alas ! for the substantiation of these illusive schemes, man remains the same peccant, unhappy being he was six thousand years ago, and the earth continues the scene of the same round of transient pleasures, and of durable pains and penalties, it ever has been since the fall. There are found individuals in society whose pride of intellect rests upon a basis entirely distinct from a high, or extravagant appreciation of the reason of collective man. But while holding in low estimation the impersonal reason, they in pleasing contemplation of their rectitude of judgment most liberally offer opinions to others, as alone entitled to approval in the sight of wisdom. Contributing in an especial degree to such an exalted conception of their infallibility of mind, two operative sentiments are very generally entertained. The first is, that sincerity is a proof of safety in moral matters, and the second, which is ever found co-existent with the first, is that, consistency requires a man to persist in adhering to an opinion once announced. Pride of intellect is greatly fostered by these two very prevalent sentiments, for if sincerity is a just test of my safety in moral matters the more sincerely I believe that I am right and the more tenaciously I adhere to that decision, the greater my security. To be sincere in our views of truth is



assuredly a duty of primary obligation, but to make sincerity the criterion of moral excellence is to offer a premium to ignorant presumption, which more confidently, because more blindly, confides in its views, than does watchful and modest inquiry.

A very important part of the probation of man on earth consists in the liability of his rational faculties to deceive him. From this fallible condition of our reason the necessity arises for a constant vigilance over the data which form the premises of our judgments, and a vigorous precision in the logical deductions drawn from even well established data. Thence spring daily amendments, and qualifications in conclusions accurately deduced from insufficient premises, and a frequent abandonment of views derived from false data. As new lights emerge, and fresh disclosures of truth are given, the ingenuous inquirer after truth, laying aside all pride of intellect, submits his mind to the influence of a just philosophy, and "makes each day a critic on the last."

Defective culture of the mental powers is very apt to induce pride of intellect. That culture of mind is defective which is not thorough, disciplinary, and enlarged ;—which does not go down to the depths of elementary knowledge, and qualify the faculties for an alert activity in self-improvement. A thorough education liberalizes the mind from the thralldom of exclusive and limited modes of arriving at truth. But a defective culture of the intellect engenders a proud consciousness of superior parts in the acquisition of knowledge, which leads to an entire neglect of the ordinary processes and means of intellectual progress. A primary education of the faculties should produce three valuable results, otherwise some serious error must attach to the mode, or degree, of its action on the mental powers. First, a sound preliminary education should put the young in possession of the instruments and means for future advancement ; second, it should discipline the powers, and render them patient of toil, apt for receiving instruction, and cautious und circumspect in the adoption of opinions : and third, it should impart modesty, and a deep consciousness of ignorance. This last mentioned



effect of a sound training of the capacities of the young is attained by a combination of moral with intellectual culture. And at the very foundation of all just moral instruction is the inculcation of correct ideas of the character of that holy and august Being, whose breath kindles the fires of human genius, and whose inspiration giveth understanding.

Destitute of a correct idea of that finished and consummate excellence, which alone is found in the character of Deity, the mind fashions its conceptions of perfection from its narrow survey of human nature, as portrayed in the living exemplifications around, or draws the portraiture from its own interior self-inspection.

The more intensely the thoughts are fixed in the admiring contemplation of infinite goodness, wisdom and power, the more entire will be our renunciation of all pride of intellect. The scattered rays of ideal excellence when found concentrated in a bright and immutable reality, as seen in the Almighty, at once dissipates the vain illusions of human greatness, and brings man to bow in prostration of spirit at the foot of His throne, who is essential wisdom, and changeless greatness.

Intimately associated with a low and sordid conception of the character of God, in its deteriorating influence on the mind, is the notion of an impersonal deity. There are many who fancy that their ideas of God are coincident with his majesty and greatness, but who possess no adequate conception of his all-pervading personality. They think on their divine Creator as a vast, unbounded, uncontrollable principle of government;—with a tranquil, undisturbed serenity pursuing its comprehensive range of administration from generation to generation, and with an irresistible power, acting with calm regularity and universal prevalence bringing about the sequences of events in nature. No prescient, moral design, no personal interest, and present intimacy of communion, will they affix to their heartless contemplation of a presiding Deity. Thus the universe is robbed of all its moral attractions by substituting an upholding principle, pervading by mechanical force all nature, for a spiritual, omni-



present, gracious parent, "the source and centre of all minds," by whom all the fair order of nature is preserved, and by whose creative breath all things rose from chaos.

But we pass on to consider the evils, springing from pride of intellect. Speculative error will generate practical error, especially when conjoined with sincerity, and earnestness of character. This truth is deeply engraved upon the tablet of universal history. In characters of shame and folly it is burnt deep in the brow of that celebrated philosophy which swayed, with imperial power, the brightest minds of Greece and Rome.

The proud and lofty estimation in which their speculative views were held by the ancient philosophers led them to a contemptuous disregard of the real ends of all authentic research. Disdaining to be useful, the ancient philosophy expatiated in fine terms upon the dignity of reason, the sublimity of virtue, and the excellence of human nature. Utility, in the schemes of philosophy advocated in such glowing language by Plato and Seneca, was put aside as unworthy the special and patronizing notice of a cultivated and refined reason.

The object of philosophy, according to these learned ancients, is not to subserve the comforts and accommodations of life; it is not to direct the mind into researches which shall tend to the furtherance of physical enjoyment, but her exclusive office is to form the soul, and garnish it with all precious gifts and graces. Enigmatical and profitless questions made up those perpetually, revolving disputes, agitated with much keenness of argument, among the different schools of Grecian and Roman philosophy.

There was no rich treasure of valuable facts accumulated, to be transmitted from age to age; no hereditary wealth of mind to pour its copious tides along the barren and waste tracts, to fertilize and enrich the cold and sterile bosom of society. In lofty march the ancient philosophy pursued its way amidst mankind, and cast a glance of utter scorn on all the pursuits of every day life. Physical science lay a despised, neglected object, for these superlative men of renown, contended that the true philosophy should teach us, not to construct houses, but to do



without them, not to rear the arch, or fabricate cloth, or extract the metals from the earth, but to live contentedly in primitive simplicity; in stoical apathy spurning such groveling concerns.

The truth seems to be that, these wise men misconceived the province of reason; they imagined that reason must divine instead of interpret nature. Like the modern transcendentalists, the ancient philosophers were employed in excogitating the materials of their systems from their own heads, instead of going to the constitution and course of nature, and assiduously soliciting responses from her, in answer to questions humbly put by themselves. They dictated rather than enquired, and assuming the magisterial tone, demanded a subjection of the economy of things to the caprices of their versatile genius.

The great ends accomplished by Bacon, in the reform wrought by the force of his acute and powerful intellect in philosophy were, first, to teach man that "he should not arrogantly search for the sciences in the narrow cells of human wit, but humbly in the greater world;" second, that "the empire of man over things is founded on the arts and sciences alone, for," adds he most appositely, "nature is only to be commanded by obeying her; and third, that, "access to the kingdom of man which is founded on the sciences resembles the kingdom of heaven, where no admission is conceded except to children." Utility and progress are the grand purposes of the Baconian philosophy. It requires that an entire renunciation of all the idols of a former philosophy, and of all inherent prepossessions and prejudices, should be made, before man can become the interpreter and minister of nature. Patient observation of phenomena, in their sequences and relations, and the careful treasuring up in the mind the laws of the procession of phenomena, with a rigid deduction from all the facts observed, must be gone through, by every one who aspires to become the minister and interpreter of nature. Pride of intellect is at once offended at such a method, and breaks away from this toilsome and humble process to climb the heights of speculation, and at one wide glance bring all nature under the eye.



In the early stages of the developement of reason, whether in individuals or communities, certain profitless and insoluble problems call forth the most ardent efforts of speculative minds.

In what does virtue consist? What is fate and free will? Are all things fated? Is pain an evil? Can we be certain of any, and can we be certain that we are certain of nothing? Can a wise man be unhappy? These, and similar questions were debated with much earnestness by the ancient philosophers. And in a later age when men toiled to be frivolous, and seemed to delight in treading a petty circle of endless trifling, the following barren topics were debated with pertinacity and angry zeal. Is the essence of the mind distinct from its existence? If the mind has freedom of choice, is this independent will a quiddity, or an entity? Is virtue good because it has intrinsic goodness, or has it this intrinsic goodness because it is good? Do angels pass from one point of space to another, without passing through the intermediate points? Can the Deity cause a mode to exist without a substance, and whether in knowing all things he knows universals, or only things singular?

Amid the keen and unprofitable contests provoked by such questions, no progress could possibly be made in useful knowledge.

Pride of intellect kept up the contestation on such idle themes, because men were unwilling to admit that questions which folly puts, cannot be answered by reason. Among our modern dogmatic, and utopian wise men, questions equally vain are every day propounded, and much learned dust involves the combatants, who are struggling to make all men believe that to their gifted sight new revelations of truth are imparted. Revolving in such a circle, the mind advances not a step in valuable acquisition; it but beats time, without any onward march.

An appetency for novel things, and a credulous reliance on extraordinary statements, are often found in the same person, who is elate with a proud consciousness of superior sagacity. The advocacy of wild and transcendental doctrines; or new and visionary speculations, with vast pretensions of philosophic



certitude, are the modes in which pride of intellect exhibits its high conceit of a capacity, not granted others, of detecting truth as she lurks amid retired haunts, far from vulgar gaze.

The mental capacities of others are disparaged by him who profoundly meditative of his own originality and force of thought, grows impatient and intolerant, when opposition rises against his announcements. Thus your thorough dogmatist in any newly fabricated crudity, which he baptises with the name of science, has his ire awakened whenever you hint an objection or hesitate assent, to his proposition. He has entered the kingdom of science not as a little child, humbly asking to be guided, but as a giant, prescribing terms, and demanding submission.

Two additional evils arise from pride of intellect, of a character still more grave than any yet enumerated. Misanthropy and infidelity are the legitimate offspring of arrogant pretensions of mental power.

Pride of intellect leads the man, who feels the stirrings of an oracle within, to dictate peremptorily his opinions, not to suggest and explain them. Meeting with hostile demonstrations on every hand to such an offensive and aggressive mode of making known the revelations of the light burning within, and finding his darling theories treated with ridicule, or perhaps, with rude banter, the dogmatist becomes soured ;—laments the degeneracy of the age, and the blindness of those who will not acknowledge his superior wisdom, and defer to this authority.

From the proud eminence as a philanthropic teacher of ignorance, and the humane guide of the blind, he descends into the gloomy region of misanthropic spite, and growling malediction. Perhaps already has he rejected revelation, ere he descended from his proud height of reformer and critic. Reason has told him that he must make her decisions and expositions the test of the word of God. "Nature," he oft repeats with a sad misapplication of the quotation, "is elder scripture writ by God's own hand." And as he has held familiar converse with nature, having been admitted into her very audience chamber,



he asserts, that no religious doctrines are to be received as true, unless they have the approval of reason, and are coincident with rational views of man and of the universe. But what are the intellectual circumstances of man when he sits as judge upon what is reasonable to accept as coming from heaven. Has passion and prejudice not enfeebled his reason? Has error not spread a cloud over it? Is reason unfettered by pride, or not reduced to servitude by false education? Does not the moral state of the mind very frequently decide the judgments it makes? Does not the affections spread a discolored medium around the entire horizon of reason, and are not all objects seen through that distorting medium?

But what precise signification are we to attach to the term reason, when it is said that reason is to be the judge in matters of revelation? By reason is often meant the faculty by which we investigate truth, detect error, draw inferences from premises, and by consecutive argument establish propositions. Reason in this sense can be no judge, for it is only a messenger sent out to explore, and bring back information. It is but the intellectual power searching after truth, and by a perception and appropriation of evidence, through comparison, arrives at just conceptions of things.

Very often, however, the word reason is employed to denote the sum of notions and sentiments which constitutes the standard by which the reasonableness of any matter is judged. In this sense a man may say that any proposition is agreeable to his reason, or contrary to it, or above it. If the position he is called to examine appears accordant to the collection of notions in his own mind, which he regards as indubitably certain, then it is agreeable to reason. If irreconcilable with what he looks upon as unquestionable truth, then it is contrary to reason. Or, if out of the range of his mode of thinking it is above his reason. Evidently the standard must fluctuate in each man's mind as he advances in knowledge. Thus, it seems unreasonable to all uneducated persons, that water should be composed of two principal supporters of combustion, and that oxygen and



hydrogen, the most inflammable of substances, in combination, should extinguish flame. And to the reason of the ignorant the proposition that, the earth revolves on its own axis, and that the sun in reference to the earth stands still, there is a positive contradiction. And, besides, what is meant by reason being a judge in religious matters? Is the judge to exercise an authoritative power of dictation, and peremptorily to decide *a priori* what the testimony should be to establish the truth? Or, is the judge to preside in conducting a fair examination, by which he shall distinguish and form correct conclusions agreeably to the evidence?

The office of reason is to examine the validity of the claims of revelation to our acceptance by a calm, impartial scrutiny of the historical, prophetic, miraculous, and internal moral evidences and attestations, which accredit and establish its high pretensions. But in pride of reason to decide whether a scriptural doctrine is true upon the narrow ground that it is agreeable to our slender mass of ideas, is a position fraught with the most revolting scepticism, of a being at best but "darkly wise"—who refuses the light of God's throne, because it partakes not of the light emitted by the sparks of his own kindling.

**CORRECTIVES OF PRIDE OF INTELLECT.**—These are, first, just conceptions of God's character and attributes; second, an abiding consciousness of the liability of human reason to be misled by the erring lights of earth, and our deep need of divine illumination; third, a free and generous culture of mind; fourth, mental discipline commenced in early life, and carried on through the years of mature existence; fifth, a correct estimate of the limited range of man's intellectual powers in the discovery of truth; of the necessary imperfection of all human knowledge, and the failure in practical results of much that we know. Knowledge, of itself, is altogether inadequate to protect the mind from inflated feelings of superiority. The consciousness of mental acquisition promotes instead of diminishes extravagant ideas of personal worth, just as the accumulation of wealth, or the possession of social influence, conduces to give the man an



exalted opinion of his merit, and to induce a complacent sense of his relative importance among his fellow men.

The adventitious motives which urge men to acquire knowledge are as various as those which actuate to the procurement of wealth. The love of distinction, the desire of influence and the hope of securing the means of physical enjoyment and of worldly accommodation, are very frequently the strongest inducements to the acquisition of knowledge. A great degree of cherished pride, and a jealous sensibility of human opinion, often accompany through life those distinguished for genius, high talents, and extraordinary attainment. The love of knowledge operates with urgent force and vividness upon many ingenuous minds, but other, and perhaps more potent influences are constantly at work to impel men to the cultivation of their intellectual powers. Unless the mind is directed to some nobler aim than that, to the attainment of which the majority of literary and scientific men, are aspiring; unless the thoughts traverse some higher sphere of contemplation than the ordinary interests of life can afford; unless abstract excellence inflame the imagination, and enliven hope, and warm the generous sensibilities of the soul, the individual becomes steeped in selfishness and all his meditations are imbued with high conceits of his own vast consequence;

“He builds his little Babylon of straw,—  
Echoes the proud Assyrian in his heart,  
And cries, behold the wonders of my might.”

As a matter, therefore, of mere intellectual advantage it is incumbent on every cultivated man to form just conceptions of the character of Him, in whom all the beams of knowledge are centered, and who alone possesses the fulness of wisdom. A reverential posture of mind toward the great and august Fountain of wisdom abases all arrogance of mind, and disenchants us of the illusions of human glory. Connected with the formation of correct view of God's character, is the humiliating estimate which man should form of his own intellectual greatness, and of the inherent tendencies of his reason to be blinded by passion,



by prejudice, and worldly interest. Therefore, under a deep sense of the incompetency of human wisdom to penetrate the mysteries of our being, and solve the dark enigmas of our origin, present trials and future destiny, let us lift up our intellectual eye to the throne of Supernal Light, for illumination, and guidance.

An education which prepares the mind for being a mere instrument, by the employment of which fortune, distinction, and power may be acquired, is not a free and generous culture of the faculties. That is a good education which not only fits a man for acting well his part in life, and which adorns him for his appropriate sphere, but which also developes, in harmonious proportion, all his powers of thought, and all the sensibilities of his heart. An extensive intellectual education, or an education of thought and not of principle, only capacitates a person for exercising adroitly and successfully the implements, and means of secular success. A free expansion of the moral nature communicates an aggrandizement of thought and emotion, and lifts the mind up to the comprehension and enjoyment of those great interests of our spiritual and immortal nature, which ennoble and purify the heart, and prepare for holding communion with the Father of spirits.

Early parental, and scholastic discipline exerts a benign effect on the whole course of a man's life. From the cradle, through all the intermediate periods of life to old age, man requires the controlling hand of discipline. By discipline we are taught the necessity of obeying law, and of being directed by a wisdom superior to our own. Self education or a dilligent discipline over one's self, implies two things,—the love of excellence and the power of self control. Self discipline should nurture the germ of high moral feeling after excellence, and by the interposition of the will, energetic from love of excellence, all inordinate, debasing affections, and impurities of thought should be banished the sanctuary within, and pride of intellect repressed, as altogether inimical to genuine nobleness of soul. Pride glories in what it possesses, has faith in itself, and is imperious, and intolerant, and exacting, whilst true nobleness of



soul is modest, and liberal, and scarce approves its own goodness, and is continually seeking approval from conscience, and from God. A sober consideration of the limited range of mental power possessed by man for the discovery of truth, of the imperfection of all human knowledge, and of the failure in practical fruits of much of our knowledge, should check pride of intellect, and teach us to carry our faculties meekly. Of all the inhabitants of this globe, man is the most helpless and imbecile at birth. Look at this negative of humanity; this blank without superscription—or any signatures of thought and feeling—and what is there here of mental demonstrations to glory in? How slow and arduous is the advancement of this young creature in the ways of virtue and knowledge! See how the attention flags and what unceasing discipline is required to keep it alive to mental improvement! How frail the memory, which lets slip so much valuable knowledge, after it has been toilsomely deposited in its grasp! How sluggish the faculties, which require constant provocatives to incite them to the pursuit of truth! How weak the capacity to prosecute abstract science, and how few reach any height in such attainments? How soon fatigue oppresses, and inertness seizes the brightest powers of thought.

Then reflect that all our knowledge has to come through restricted avenues; that the sight, hearing, and touch are the great inlets to perception, and that deprived of these sensitive inlets how utterly null is the exercise of reason. Again, man has no intuition of things, he is born ignorant, and remains so until by a slow process of acquisition, ideas are accumulated. Of the essential constitution of matter and of mind, of the mysterious ties which bind soul and body together, how little do we know. And reflect that aside from revelation, what darkness and incertitude rest on the mind as respects the character of Deity, and how awful the doubts which agitate and terrify the soul when it looks beyond the dark sepulchre.

Consider the imperfection attached to every species of scientific inquiry. Astronomy, the most perfect of the sciences,



requires much in the way of observation, and inductive and deductive reasoning to advance it to perfection. The nebulosity of the heavens, the movements and nature of comets, the parallax of the fixed stars, these and other interesting subjects, demand much additional investigation. Chemistry, another very advanced branch of physical science, has been prosecuted with intense ardor, and a rich variety of results, within a few years, but still the most eminent chemists lament the deficiencies attached to their analyses and syntheses and pant after higher degrees of certainty and utility in this department of human knowledge.

A still greater degree of imperfection belongs to medicine, to law, and to the art of government. Medical science requires much augmentation of light ; though not a stationary, it is far from being a perfect science.

The law is replete with uncertainty, decision conflicts with decision, precedent overrules precedent, and new laws are, almost every day, supplanting old enactments. Endless disputes are waged on the best forms of polity, and on the constructive meanings of organic law.

Lastly, reflect on the very circumscribed application which can be made of human knowledge.

In ethics how afflicting the deficiency of practical results, where there exists expanded conceptions on the great questions of right, and duty. How few practice half of what they know on these subjects ! And then look at the difficulties of reducing to practice the wisest plans for the improvement of society. Obstacles perpetually beset the way of the most excellent legislative provisions for the prosperity of a people. It seems, according to the experience of society, that abstract perfection in a legal regulation was fatal to its beneficent practical operation.

Perfection dwells not on earth, though there exists much excellence among men. Human virtue may be carried far, but it can never proceed beyond the reach of danger. Human knowledge is kept within narrow limits, is conversant with a small



number of objects, and profoundly versed in a very restricted circle of research. Our speculative views far transcend our ability to substantiate and render effectual our knowledge. Scientific investigation goes far beyond art: Age after age elapsed, under the pressure of the most urgent circumstances, before the printing press, the steam engine, and the rail road were invented, and yet how obvious to our minds seems the suggestion of their invention.

In review of the limited powers of mind in the race, of the deficiencies of human knowledge, and of the practical inutility of much of that knowledge, should not all pride of intellect, all assumption of mental glory, be rebuked? And should not every ingenuous, philosophic mind be ready to admit that,

“ Reason’s glimmering ray  
Was lent, not to assure our doubtful way,  
But guide us upward to a better day.”

That better day has dawned on our world in the revelation from on high; the day spring has taken hold on the ends of of the earth, and through its precious influence the universal reign of truth and goodness will be secured unto all mankind.

*Gentlemen of the Philalethean Society:—*

In the buoyant period of life which you now enjoy, earnestness and sincerity of character are qualities, honorable and attractive. Inactivity of mind, and disingenuousness of soul are disgraceful at any age, but when found in youth they resemble the decayed and withered branches which deform a beautiful and vigorous tree. But the tendency of all our qualities is to excess. Earnestness of character often degenerates into impassioned self will, and sincerity may become offensive to others by exhibitions of harsh and unfeeling bluntness. Earnestness often leads to pride of intellect, and ministers to impatient vehemence at opposition to a favorite opinion. Hence intolerance, and a spirit of unfair representation of an adversary’s statements. Partizanship is thus engendered, and truth is often sacrificed to the promotion of victory over an opponent. The desire of surpassing, in itself, is neither good nor bad, but partakes



either of goodness or viciousness according to the complication of other feelings in the breast of the agent.

Emulation does not necessarily create enmity, but is entirely consistent with kindness and magnanimity. Without emulation, or a desire of excelling, no young man can ascertain his relative powers in the acquisition of knowledge. Pride of intellect is discountenanced by generous competition, and one great benefit which is derived from a college education is that which results from the collision of kindred minds, by which comparisons are instituted, presumptuous ignorance reproved, and industry and zeal aroused in the pursuit of literary excellence. A college life is highly conducive to evolution of latent talent. Indeed it is a miniature, in the spirit of emulation which it awakens, and in the rewards of approbation and distinction which its honors confer, of the great world into which each of you, with eager steps, will ere long, rush.

Gentlemen, life is but a series of competitions ;—a protracted scene of emulation ; a succession of comparisons of our relative powers. What would human existence be, debased as it so often is by sordid cares, and shorn of its splendor by selfish aims, were there no stirring impulses derived from an honorable ambition to excel ? To “provoke to emulation” was the wish of an apostle, and each pursuit of life, in proportion to its aptitude to elicit a fervent aspiration after excellence, is more or less congenial to the great purposes of individual and social progress. Two species of reward lie in perspective along your path of life. One species of reward, which the nobler few seek after, is adapted to the more elevated part of our nature,—the other is addressed to the wants of physical well being. The first refers to the insatiable longings of the mind for virtuous activity, and the cheering consciousness of our having accomplished, in part at least, the design of our mission on earth. The second looks to the material recompense of the toil endured, and in equivalent returns of physical gratification seeks the highest boon. The one is spiritual, and is enlivened by the radiance of heaven, the other is corporeal, and is encouraged and upheld by the pressing exigencies of time and sense.



Addict yourselves to the higher, nobler ends of your existence, and animate your efforts by motives drawn from an honorable desire to excel, and from a holy anxiety to do something for the good of society. Let me suggest three inducements of great weight, which should prompt your daily exertions;—the desire to excel, the desire of doing good—and the desire of pleasing God.

Be your standard elevated. By the power of abstraction form to yourselves some exalted model, or take some living character of virtuous worth and intellectual greatness as your exemplar, and be determined to push onward your upward path of life, till your feet are planted on the heights whence you may rejoice at the dangers passed, and look in modest assurance upward for the smiles of heaven.

Remember your endless destiny, and ever keep “in the eye and prospect of your soul” the interminable march of your immortal being, and in humble, confiding submission to the direction of Supreme Wisdom, enter upon that course of life which shall receive the approbation of your own consciences, and of good men, and of God. Mental obedience is a very important mode of probation, and a moral habit of mind, well regulated to submission, is as requisite to the reception of truth, as to the observance of duty.

Clouds enshroud the plans and purposes of God; a few scattered rays of his goodness and justice emerge from his throne, and are transmitted to our perception through the works of his hands. But in the declaration of God in his son Jesus Christ, there shines, in strong and glowing beams, the divine holiness, justice and love, which throw a warm and broad light of certainty, hope, and immortality, on this dubious and perplexing scene of things. The feeble light of reason can never dispel the obscurities which rest on heaven’s plans. And although the written word reveals enough to satisfy the humble enquirer after truth, and to assure the mind on the great questions pertaining to the origin, present condition, and future prospects of man, yet an unhallowed and prying curiosity never will be



satiated by the the disclosures of the Bible. It offers no food to a restless appetite for that which merely ministers to the speculative tendencies of the mind. A part only, a very small part of God Almighty's wide administration, and of the unsearchable depths of his essence, is disclosed. Whilst this partial disclosure of his ways is available to all practical purposes, it is unsatisfactory and repugnant to pride of intellect. Instead of meeting this measured communication of truth by sceptical murmurs, let us be reminded that the state we are passing through is initiatory, not final ; is a trial, a warfare, a pilgrimage, and that for the pure rewards of constant and victorious virtue we must look forward to the unclouded manifestation of truth in that day, when faith will be lost in vision, and hope in fruition. Dismiss all arrogant pretensions of mental superiority, and in modest and persevering application strive for a larger measure of knowledge. No human being can claim immunity from error, and therefore no man can safely dispense with a perpetual and vigilant examination. However confident we may be that we are free from error, no one should feel secure, for even were we to attain perfection, in this life we can never be certain of it. It is only when we are strenuously awake in the pursuit of truth, and anxiously watching against error, that knowledge exercises its requisite practical impression on the heart, and on the life.

Gentlemen, you are fairly embarked on the ocean of life ; —many wrecks are strewed on the waves around your buoyant barks. Like a skilful and cautious navigator keep your reckoning with care,—“keep a good look out,”—and take an observation when opportunity offers. With your chart and compass aboard, fix your eye, on the bright polar star of man's immortal voyage, so that when the storm rages—and the surges, rise high—and rocks and quicksands threaten to wreck your bark, your hope may be as an anchor, sure and fixed, and above the noise of the billows, deep calling unto deep at the noise of the water spout, the voice of Him who lays his hand abroad on the deep, and stills the tumult of the sea, may be heard by you saying, “fear not, I am with thee, be not dismayed, I am thy God.”